

Working With Communities to Disrupt Terrorism

Testimony of Professor Deborah A. Ramirez before the U.S. House Subcommittee on Intelligence, Information sharing, and Terrorism Risk Assessment.

The best way to obtain the community information needed to thwart terrorist threats is by applying community policing techniques to counter- terrorism. Homegrown Muslim terrorists are likely to reside in Muslim communities; Muslim terrorists from abroad are likely to attempt to conceal themselves in these same communities. We are blessed in the United States with a Muslim population that, with very few exceptions, are committed to combating terrorism. Yet, we have failed to take advantage of this blessing and develop a systematic strategy to obtain and use community information to thwart terrorism and fight extremism. Our British counterparts, after the painful lessons learned from the London subway bombings in 2005, have made enormous efforts to develop such a systematic strategy, which they aptly call their PREVENT strategy. To be blunt, they are miles ahead of U.S. law enforcement, whose efforts in this regard are local rather than national. We can learn from the British example.

The benefits of such a strategy can be measured in terrorist acts averted and lives spared. The British first reaped the benefits of their strategy in April 2008, when members of a mosque in the UK contacted local police and provided information about Isa Ibrahim, a student who planned to blow himself up with a suicide vest. Ibrahim was arrested and convicted. This was the first time a tip from the Muslim community in Great Britain led to a major terrorism arrest. We tasted the fruits of the efforts of our own community outreach efforts in December 2009, when the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), put families in touch with the FBI to report that their sons had left for Pakistan with the intent to join the fight against America. This tip led to the arrest of the young men in Pakistan, and probably spared both their lives as well as the lives of U.S. and Pakistani soldiers. Because community information can thwart terrorist threats, it is an essential tool to put into the counter terrorism tool box.

Yet, in the United States today, the few community-law enforcement partnerships that are focused on preventing terrorism, hate crimes and extremism operate independently of each other, without any central coordination or collaborative structure. There are no national programs to provide the training, protocols, tools, or research necessary to demonstrate how to begin, nurture and strengthen these community efforts. Nor is there a central clearinghouse for information about such efforts, which could disseminate promising practices, best practices and lessons learned in the U.S. and abroad. More fundamentally, we lack a national collaborative infrastructure in which to organize these efforts. Some of these efforts are being made by local police departments, others by DHS, still others by FBI field offices. We need a single unified structure.

How could we design a coordinated national infrastructure to support and nurture these efforts? We need each FBI field office with a Muslim community to meet on a regular basis with community members to develop local collaborative strategies for preventing terrorism, extremism and hate crimes. In these meetings, community and law enforcement need to build bridges of trust and communication. Specifically, we need each of these field offices to create community message centers staffed by agents trained to evaluate the reliability and credibility of community information. This means training community members about what to look for, informing them as to whom to call, designating trained law enforcement officers on how to evaluate community information, and creating protocols for responding to important community tips. To make this program work, we need a national training and resource center to coordinate and support these efforts, and we need such a center to be in partnership with a university and located within a university setting.

Why should we do this?

1. Because we stand a greater chance of conducting rational, well-reasoned, thoughtful counterterrorism, civil rights, and counterintelligence investigations if we have long-standing, trusting relationships with the community. Engagement with the community provides law enforcement with valuable information and expertise that may not otherwise be available.
2. Because a lot of people out there are counting on us to get this right.
3. Because all of us in this room are men and women of good will who have spent endless hours trying to prevent another attack. If there were another attack on American soil, all of us would want to say that we did EVERYTHING, EVERYTHING in our power to prevent it. But if we fail to garner the political will to create this infrastructure, we won't be able to say that.

Professor Deborah A. Ramirez
Professor of Law
Executive Director of Partnering for
The Prevention and Community Safety
Northeastern University
School of Law
400 Huntington Ave.
Boston, MA 02115
Email: d.ramirez@neu.edu
Cell: (781)454-7525
Website: www.ace.neu.edu/pfp